

White Working-Class Boys: Are our measures of “working-class” fit for purpose?

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University of
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What is working-class?



“A social group that consists of people who earn little money, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work.”
(Cambridge Dictionary)



“You’re working-class if you get paid weekly, typically in cash. You’re middle class if you get paid monthly, as a salaried employee with benefits and a pension.”
(The Guardian, 2021)



“I was told that working-class people keep their ketchup in the fridge, the middle classes in the larder and the upper classes don’t even know what ketchup is.”
(The Guardian, 2021)

What is working-class?



“As many as 60% of us describe ourselves as working-class, (including half of people in managerial and professional occupations) almost exactly the same proportion as in 1983.” (Curtice et al., 2016)



“Traditional categories of working, middle and upper class are outdated, fitting 39% of people.” (BBC, 2013; Savage et al., 2013)

Outdated terminology



BBC's Great British Class Survey (Savage et al., 2013)

1. Elite
2. Established middle class
3. Technical middle class
4. New affluent workers
5. Traditional working-class
6. Emergent service workers
7. Precariat



The National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC, 2021)

1. Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations
2. Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own account workers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations
7. Routine occupations
8. Never worked and long-term unemployed
9. Full-time students

Working-class in education

Baars et al. (2016) identified eight criteria used to identify “working-class” either as a single measure or in combination with others:

 Free school meal (FSM) eligibility

 Parental occupation

 Household income (either the lowest quintile or below 60% of the median)

 Parental uptake of state benefits

 Groups experiencing limited social mobility

 Home postcode and Index of Multiple Deprivation scores

 Receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)

 Attendance at a low progression school

Free School Meal Eligibility



Positives

- Frequently used proxy measure, so easier to compare research
- The data is readily and consistently available between academic years and “is available within the National Pupil Database” (Boliver et al., 2022)
- “Receipt of free school meals and low household income emerge as two highly suitable general indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage.” (Boliver et al., 2022)



Negatives

- Does not capture social, economic or cultural capital of being “working-class”
- FSM eligibility is a binary – disadvantage is not
- Not all disadvantaged pupils are eligible for FSM and may therefore be left out
- Pupils may be eligible for different periods
- False negatives – “not all families eligible for free school meals take up this entitlement, and take-up rates decline as school children get older” (CoWA, 2016; Boliver et al., 2022).

IMD



Positives

- “The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is another good option for an area level marker with a moderate relationship with low household income (correlation = 0.47).” (Jerrim, 2021)
- Like FSM, it is available in the public domain and only requires postcode information.
- Can be used to compare small areas across England. (Dept. of Communities and Local Government, 2015)
- Can be used to compare larger areas, such as local authorities. (Dept. of Communities and Local Government, 2015)



Negatives

- IMD is “biased against those who are BAME, live in a single parent household and who rent. IMD is also not comparable across the four constituent countries that form the UK” (Jerrim, 2021)
- “As an indicator, the IMD/Indices of Deprivation are not able to provide information specifically about lack of financial resources and also give no absolute measures. In addition, the way they have been calculated over time means each version is not comparable.” (Dymond-Green, 2020)

The HeppSY Learner Survey



HeppSY adopted the CFE Learner Survey to measure key outcomes associated with learners' understanding of HE and their likelihood to apply in the future.



The HeppSY evaluation and data team validated the scales in the CFE Learner Survey using past survey data before implementation.



The survey ran between the 1st of November 2022 and the 5th of January 2023.



The survey was completed by almost 5,000 students in Years 10-13 and College Levels 2 – 3, 1.



Identified White working-class boys using IMD



Bespoke programme designed to support White working-class boys



Strategically targeted – schools with high numbers eligible boys were invited



Based on trends identified through the 21/22 Learner Survey



Ran in 22/23 across 2 HeppSY centres



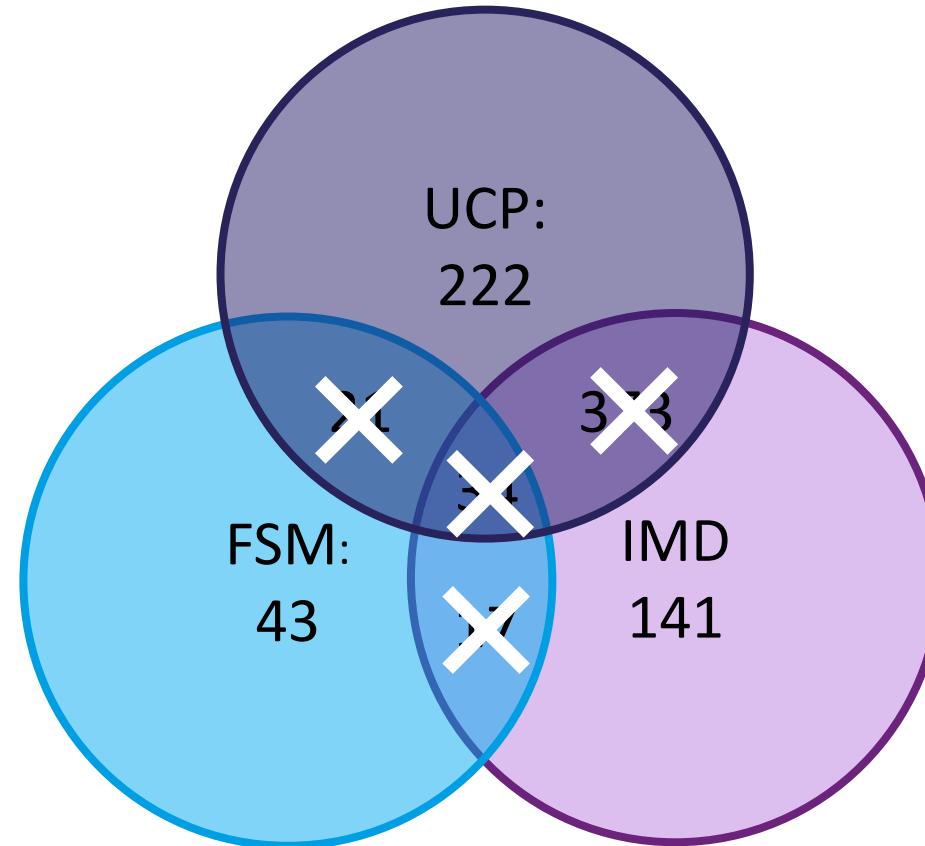
Identified White working-class boys using FSM eligibility and UCP status

HeppSY's “working-class” White boys

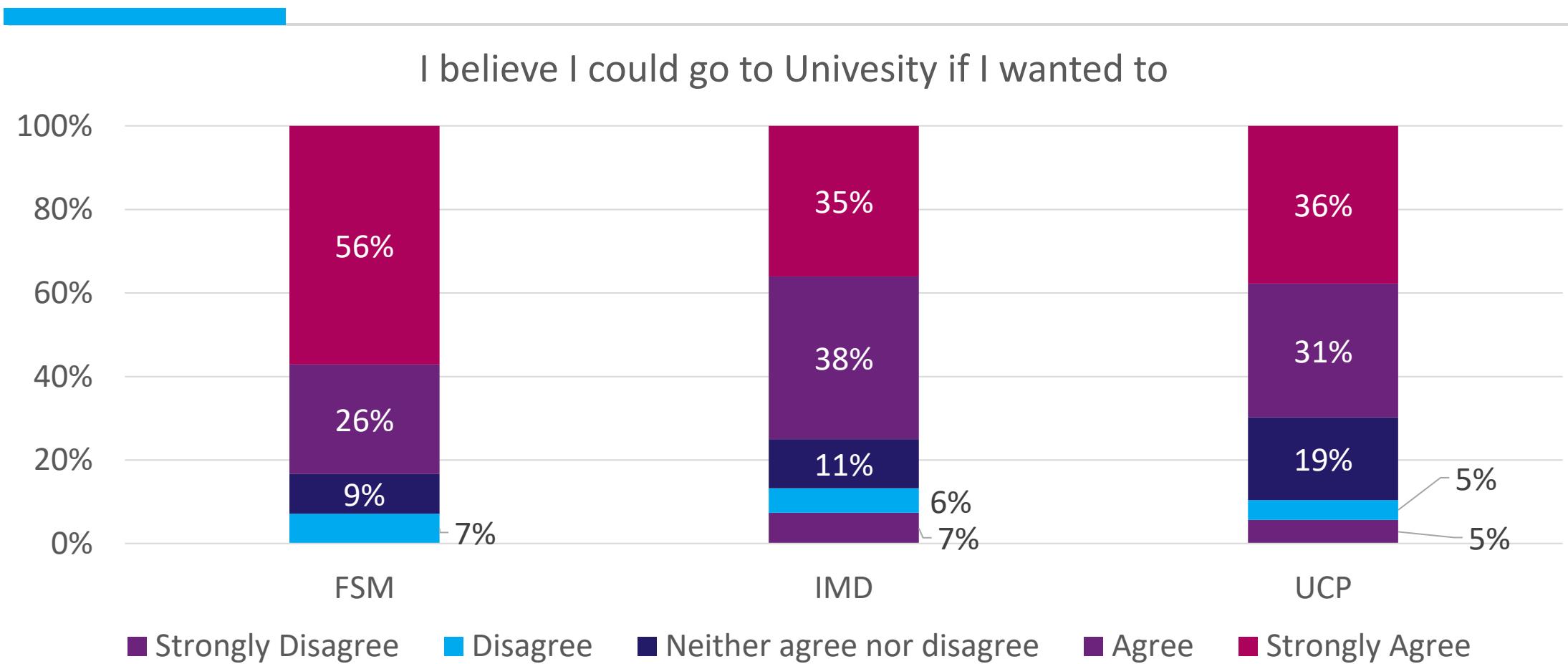


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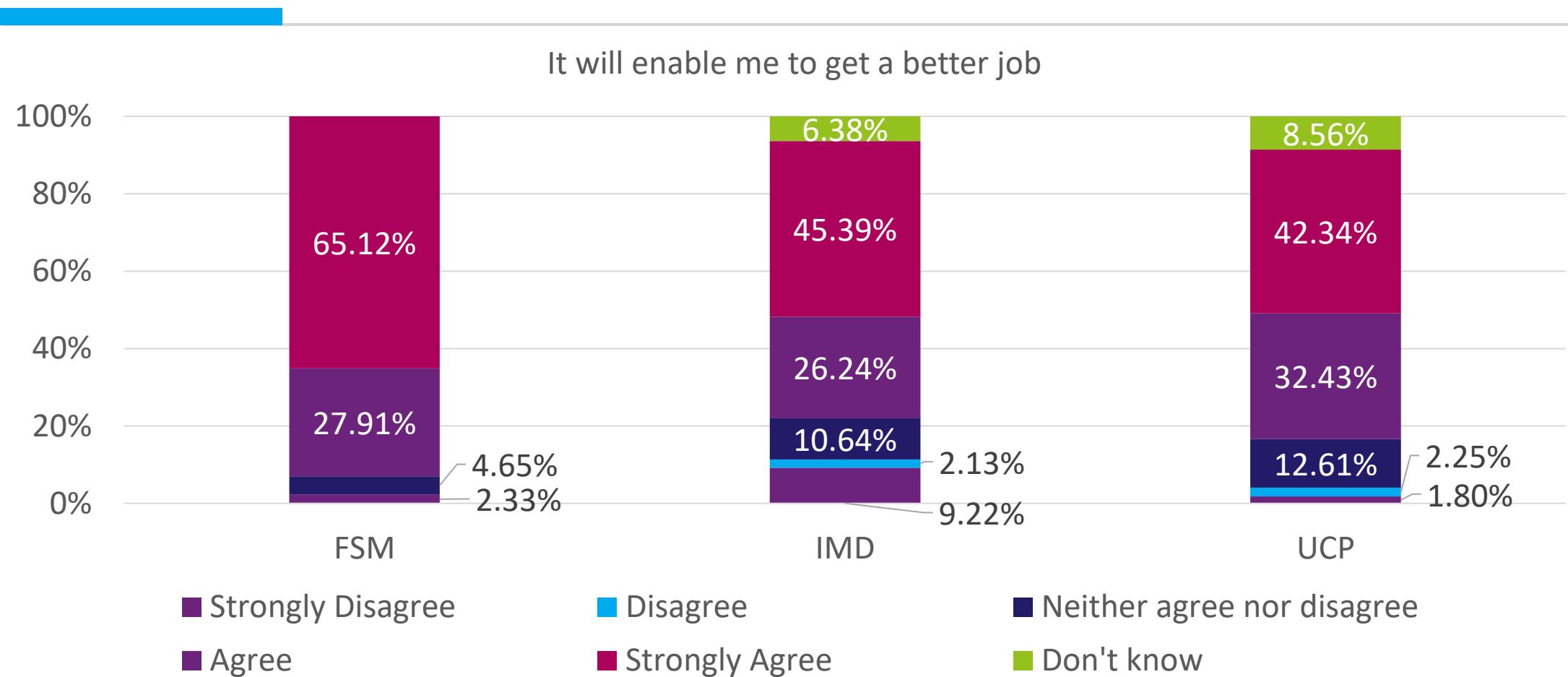
HeppSY's “working-class” White boys



HeppSY's “working-class” White boys

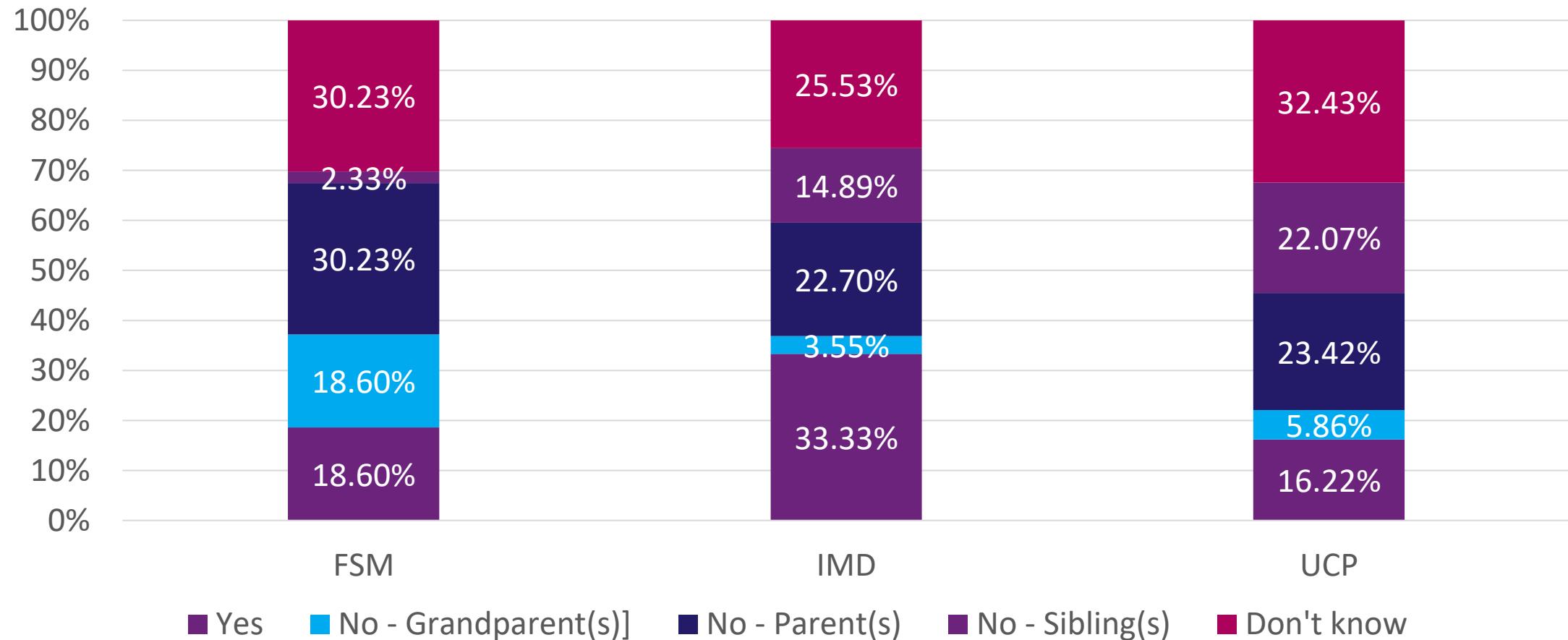


HeppSY's “working-class” White boys



HeppSY's “working-class” White boys

If you go on to HE, would you be the first person in your immediate family to go?



Conclusions...

...according to: Eth_Gen_FSM

- Over half (**56%**) of White working-class boys believe they could go to university if they wanted to.
- 65% believe attending HE will enable them to get a better job.
- 19% would be first generation students.
- **2%** have siblings that have already attended HE.

...according to: Eth_Gen_IMD

- Only 35% of White working-class boys believe they could go to university if they wanted to.
- 45% believe attending HE will enable them to get a better job.
- **33%** would be first generation students.
- 15% have siblings that have already attended HE.

...according to: Eth_Gen_UCP

- Only 36% of White working-class boys believe they could go to university if they wanted to.
- 42% believe attending HE will enable them to get a better job.
- 16% would be first generation students.
- 22% have siblings that have already attended HE.



Results were inconsistent across survey questions: some output demonstrated identical patterns, while others were notably different

Discussion



Do we need a standard definition of “working-class”? How do we use these definitions in practice? What are we trying to achieve?



Yes

- A standard could facilitate easier and more robust comparison of research.



No

- Do we risk creating another standard in a sea of standards?

Are our measures of “working-class” fit for purpose?



The term “working-class” is outdated and difficult to define



Our definitions are inconsistent and may not always capture the students we’re trying to reach



Different proxy measures yield different sample sizes and different results from the same dataset



Use more than one proxy to capture wider group of “working-class” boys

HOW STANDARDS PROLIFERATE:
(SEE: A/C CHARGERS, CHARACTER ENCODINGS, INSTANT MESSAGING, ETC)

SITUATION:
THERE ARE
14 COMPETING
STANDARDS.

14?! RIDICULOUS!
WE NEED TO DEVELOP
ONE UNIVERSAL STANDARD
THAT COVERS EVERYONE'S
USE CASES.



SOON:

SITUATION:
THERE ARE
15 COMPETING
STANDARDS.



Avoid creating new standard definitions of “working-class” and communicate our measures of disadvantage clearly.

Food for thought



Do you think we need a standard definition of “working-class”? How do we use these definitions in practice?



What are we trying to achieve when identifying “working-class” students?



How would you identify your social class? Does this fit with how we identify social class when it comes to students?

Any questions?



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